Lead like the Babaylans

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“To foretell the destiny of a nation, it is necessary to open the books that tell of her past.”

“I have therefore undertaken to annotate anew the work of Morga, published in Mexico in 1609, ***in order to awaken in our countrymen, the consciousness of our past, already almost forgotten, and to rectify what has been falsified and slandered***.”

WHO WERE THE BABAYLANS?

Babaylans were precolonial Filipino spiritual leaders, primarily women, who served as priests, healers, and community mediators.

Their roles combined ritual, medicine, and social authority, shaping communal identity before and during early colonial contact.

Functions and Roles of Babaylans

Babaylans practiced herbal medicine, spirit negotiation, and diagnostic divination to treat illness and guide decisions.

These practices integrated empirical knowledge of plants with ritual techniques, creating a respected medical-religious role.

Functions and Roles of Babaylans

Babaylans served as community *mediators with ancestors and nature spirits*, leading rituals, seasonal rites, and funerary practices essential to social cohesion.

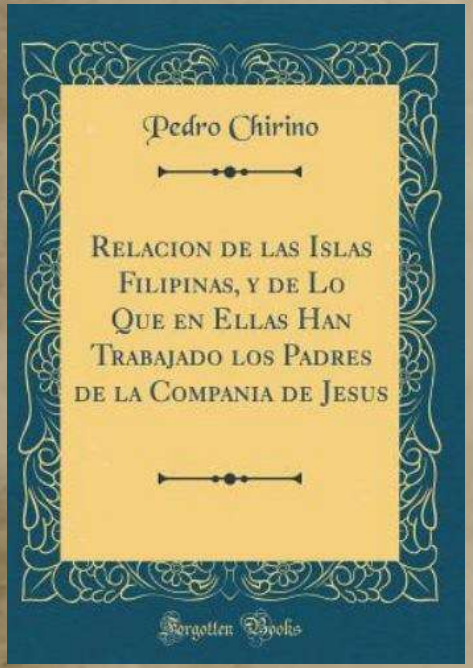
Babaylans performed divination, and conflict resolution. They maintained oral histories and led communal ceremonies.

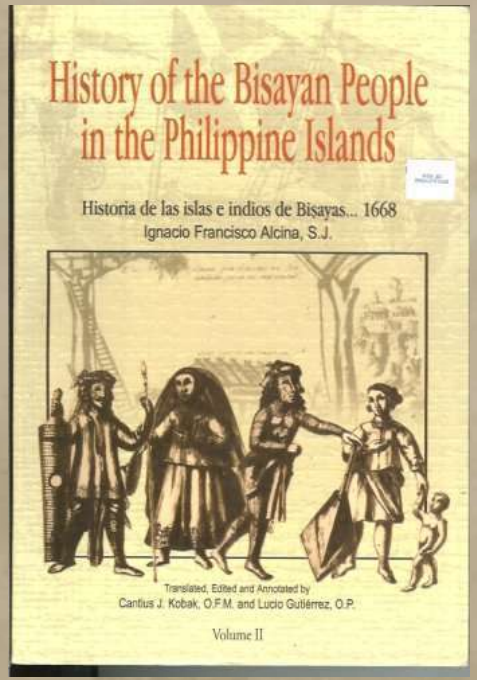
Their role combined **religious leadership** and **social governance**, overseeing conflict resolution, oral law transmission, and *communal decision-making*.

Who are the “original sources” about babaylans?

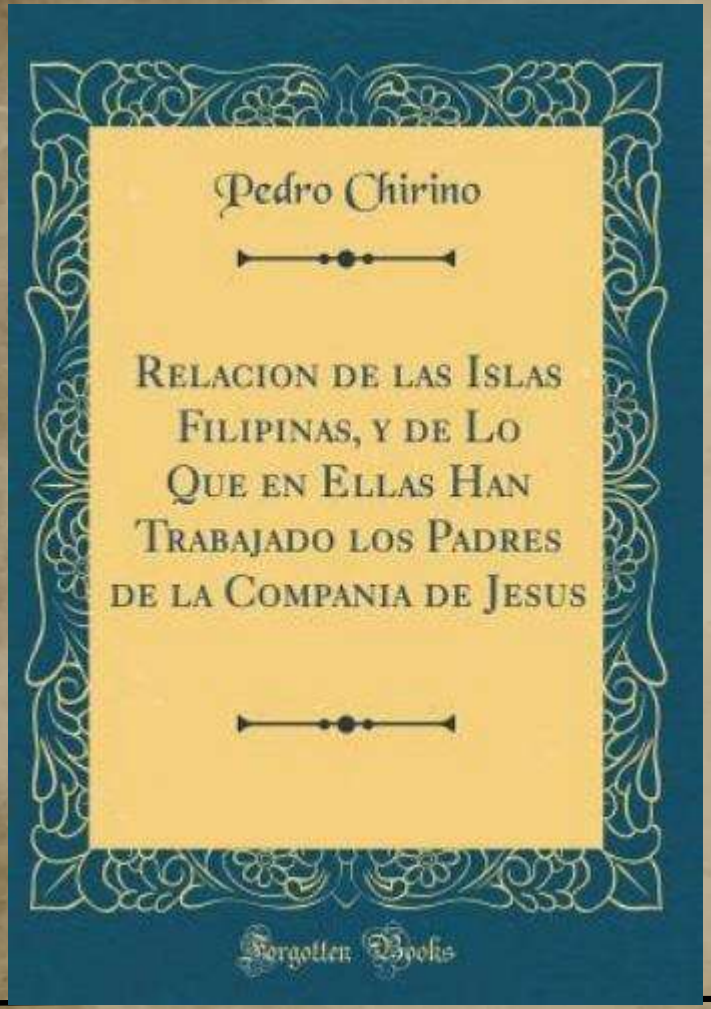
There are no written records from babaylans themselves.

Everything we have comes from **outsiders**, mostly **Spanish colonizers**.


Pedro Chirino
Relacion de las Islas Filipinas, y de Lo Que en Ellas Han Trabajado los Padres de la Compania de Jesus
Forgotten Books


History of the Bisayan People in the Philippine Islands
Historia de las islas e indios de Bisayas... 1668
Ignacio Francisco Alcina, S.J.
Translated, Edited and Annotated by
Cantius J. Kobak, O.F.M. and Lucio Gutiérrez, O.P.
Volume II

SVCESOS DE LAS ISLAS FILIPINAS.
DIRIGIDO
A DON CRISTOVAL GOMEZ DE Sandoual y Rojas, Duque de Cea.
POR EL DOCTOR ANTONIO DE MORGA,
En casa de Geronymo Balli. Año 1609.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Pedro Chirino (1604)Described Visayan spiritual practices and priests

“These natives had no temples or public places of worship, but they had priests whom they called by different names.

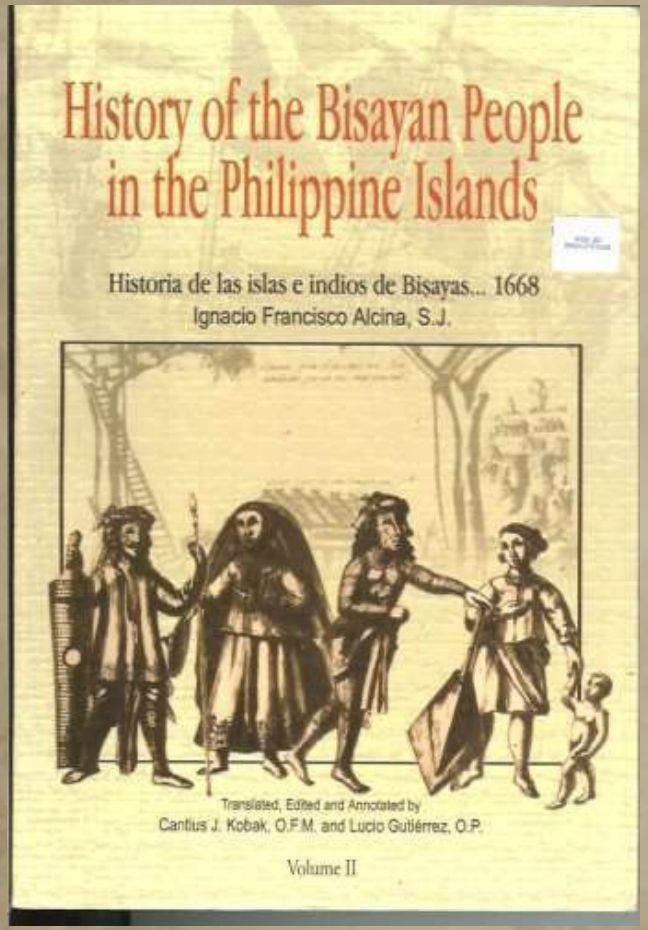
These priests offered sacrifices to their anitos, which are their gods.

They believed that these spirits could give them health, success in war, and good harvests.

When someone was sick, these priests performed rituals, offerings, and chants to call upon the spirits for healing.”

- ❌ **Colonizer's Lens (Chirino's implied framing)**
- "No temples" → seen as **lack of civilization**
- "Anitos" → interpreted as **false gods / superstition**
- Rituals → framed as **pagan or primitive practices**
- ☞ Underlying message:
  "These people are spiritually lost and need Christianity."

- 🌿 **Filipino / Decolonial Lens**
- "No temples" → spirituality is **integrated into everyday life**, not confined to buildings
- "Anitos" → **relational worldview** (humans, nature, ancestors are interconnected)
- Healing rituals → **holistic medicine** (body + spirit + community)
- ☞ Reframed meaning:
  "This is a sophisticated, community-based spiritual system."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Francisco Alcina (1668)One of the most detailed descriptions of babaylans. Wrote about rituals, healing, and social roles

“The babaylan were usually women, or men who dressed and behaved like women.

They were highly respected in the community.

They performed sacrifices, healed the sick, and spoke with spirits.

In times of illness, they would enter a trance, call upon the spirits, and diagnose the cause of sickness, whether it came from natural or spiritual causes.”

- ❌ **Colonizer's Lens**
- "Men acting like women" → seen as **deviant or sinful**
- "Trance" → interpreted as **possession or demonic influence**
- "Speaking with spirits" → labeled as **witchcraft**
- 👉 Underlying message:
  "These practices are dangerous and must be eradicated."

- 🌿 **Filipino / Decolonial Lens**
- Gender fluidity → **recognized spiritual role**, not deviance
- Trance → **altered state of consciousness for healing and insight**
- Spirit communication → **knowledge system about illness, environment, and balance**
- 👉 Reframed meaning:
  "These are culturally legitimate forms of knowledge and identity."

- **Colonizers assumed:**
- Religion = centralized, written, hierarchical (like Christianity)

- **So when they saw babaylans:**
- They concluded:
- no churches → no religion
- no Bible → no knowledge
- no priests like theirs → no authority

- **But in reality:**
- Babaylan spirituality was:
- **decentralized**
- **embodied (lived, not written)**
- **community-based**
- **ecological (connected to land and nature)**

“The Spanish did not just describe babaylans. They translated them into a language that made them appear inferior.”

“If your culture is only written about by someone who wants to change you…can that ever be a complete truth?”

ACTIVITY TIME!

Early European Descriptions of Filipino Women

1. Antonio Pigafetta
1521 (pub. 1524)
Work: Primo viaggio intorno al mondo
Background:
Italian nobleman; eyewitness chronicler of Magellan's expedition.
Passage (translated):
"The women are very beautiful and graceful… They go almost naked, wearing only a light covering."
Colonial lens:
Sees women as **objects of beauty and exotic curiosity**.
Filipino lens:
Women were **comfortable with their bodies**, not bound by European modesty norms.

2. Miguel de Loarca

📅 **1582**

📖 **Work:** Relación de las Islas Filipinas

🧍 **Background:**

Spanish encomendero reporting to the Crown.

📜 **Passage (translated):**

“The women are clean and well adorned… It is considered a disgrace for a woman not to have a lover.”

👁 **Colonial lens:**

Interprets this as **sexual looseness or lack of morality**.

🌿 **Filipino lens:**

Women exercised **agency in relationships**, and desirability was socially valued.

3. Juan de Plasencia
📅 **1589**
📖 **Work:** Customs of the Tagalogs
🧍 **Background:**
Franciscan missionary documenting Tagalog society.
📜 **Passage (translated):**
“The woman may inherit property… There is no difference between male and female in inheritance.”
👁 **Colonial lens:**
Records this to understand **how to restructure society under Christianity**.
🌿 **Filipino lens:**
Women had **economic and social equality**, contradicting European patriarchy.

4. Pedro Chirino
📅 **1604**
📖 **Work:** Relación de las Islas Filipinas
🧍 **Background:**
Jesuit missionary focused on conversion.
📜 **Passage (translated):**
“They do not value virginity… rather, they consider it a misfortune.”
👁 **Colonial lens:**
Frames Filipino women as **morally lacking** based on Catholic standards.
🌿 **Filipino lens:**
Virginity was **not the basis of dignity**, showing a different value system.

5. Antonio de Morga
📅 **1609**
📖 **Work:** Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas
👤 **Background:**
Spanish colonial official; secular observer.
📜 **Passage (translated):**
“The women are very clean and neat… and they have authority and influence.”
👁 **Colonial lens:**
Acknowledges positive traits but still within a **colonial descriptive frame**.
🌿 **Filipino lens:**
Women were **respected, influential, and socially active**, not subordinate.

6. Francisco Ignacio Alcina
1668
Work: Historia de las Islas e Indios de Bisayas
Background:
Jesuit missionary; long-term observer in the Visayas.
Passage (translated):
“A woman who dies a virgin is called ‘bingil,’ a term marking her condition.”
Colonial lens:
Focuses on **categorizing and interpreting sexuality**.
Filipino lens:
Sexuality was part of a **symbolic and cultural system**, not a moral defect.

Colonial impact and resilience

Spanish colonization sought to suppress babaylan practices through missionary and legal means.

Despite repression, many traditions persisted via adaptation, syncretism, and covert transmission within communities.

What is a Babaylan?

Philippine indigenous communities recognize a woman (or man) as a Babaylan, someone who has the ability to mediate with the spirit world, has her own spirit guides, and is given gifts of **healing**, **foretelling**, and **insight**.

In contemporary contexts, whether in urban Philippines or in Filipino diasporic communities, the Babaylan name is used by those who are inspired by the spirit in which the primary Babaylans carried out their work: the spirit of **revolution against colonization**, their belief in Sacred **Wholeness**, their **love of the country**, the desire to **serve their communities** in achieving **justice and peace.**

Babaylan Tradition concerns the Filipino Wisdom and Power within us. Filipinos everywhere can be empowered by traditions preserved, upheld, passed on by Babaylan women and men. Filipino leaders can individually and collectively strengthen, evolve and uphold this intensifying, re-emerging respect for indigenous traditions and identity, and can in turn empower communities they serve.

You may carry the traditions of the Babaylan within you because you have answered a calling of leadership in one or more of the following: **advocacy**, **activism**, **teaching**, **increasing awareness**, **healing**, **spirituality** and **vision**, struggling and working for **justice**—actions and motivation deeply connected to the context of being Filipino.

ACTIVITY TIME!

出 口
Exit

H

Hanging out – or Hung out to dry?

They are thought of as being inclusive – everyone is welcome to hang out, take a break, meet up with friends or colleagues. **There is just one big problem – these hangout stairs are not accessible to a whole range of people with disabilities.**

Box 7a. Combined generic checklist for the project identification and design stages

Element and item/question (col. 1)	Response (col. 2) No (2a)	Partly yes (2b)	Yes (2c)	Score for the item/ element (col. 3)	Result or comment (col. 4)
1.0 Involvement of women and men (max score: 2; for each item or question, 1)					
1.1 Participation of women and men in beneficiary groups in the identification of the problem (possible scores: 0, 0.5, 1.0)					
1.2 Participation of women and men in beneficiary groups in project design (possible scores: 0, 0.5, 1.0)					
2.0 Collection of sex-disaggregated data and gender-related information (possible scores: 0, 1.0, 2.0)					
3.0 Conduct of gender analysis and identification of gender issues (max scores: 2; for each item of question, 1)					
3.1 Analysis of gender gaps and inequalities related to gender roles, perspectives and needs, or access to and control of resources (possible scores: 0, 0.5, 1.0)					
3.2 Analysis of constraints and opportunities related to women's and men's participation in the project (possible scores: 0, 0.5, 1.0)					
4.0 Gender equality goals, outcomes, and outputs (possible scores: 0, 1.0, 2.0) Does the project have clearly stated gender equality goals, objectives, outcomes or outputs?					
5.0 Matching of strategies with gender issues (possible scores: 0, 1.0, 2.0) Do the strategies and activities match the gender issues and gender equality goals identified?					
6.0 Gender analysis of the likely impacts of the project (max score: 2; for each item or question, 0.67)					
6.1 Are women and girl children among the direct or indirect beneficiaries? (possible scores: 0, 0.33, 0.67)					
6.2 Has the project considered its long-term impact on women's socioeconomic status and empowerment? (possible scores: 0, 0.33, 0.67)					
6.3 Has the project included strategies for avoiding or minimizing negative impacts on women's status and welfare? (possible scores: 0, 0.33, 0.67)					
7.0 Monitoring targets and indicators (possible scores: 0, 1.0, 2.0) Does the project include gender equality targets and indicators to measure gender equality outputs and outcomes?					
8.0 Sex-disaggregated database requirement (possible scores: 0, 1.0, 2.0) Does the project M&E system require the collection of sex-disaggregated data?					
9.0 Resources (max score: 2; for each item or question, 1)					
9.1 Is the budget allotted by the project sufficient for gender equality promotion or integration? OR, will the project tap counterpart funds from LGUs/ partners for its GAD efforts? (possible scores: 0, 0.5, 1.0)					
9.2 Does the project have the expertise to promote gender equality and women's empowerment? Or, is the project committed to investing project staff time in building capacities within the project to integrate GAD or promote gender equality? (possible scores: 0, 0.5, 1.0)					
10.0 Relationship with the agency's GAD efforts (max score: 2; for each item or question, 0.67)					
10.1 Will the project build on or strengthen the agency/PCW/government's commitment to the empowerment of women? (possible scores: 0, 0.33, 0.67) IF THE AGENCY HAS NO GAD PLAN: Will the project help in the formulation of the implementing agency's GAD plan?					
10.2 Will the project build on the initiatives or actions of other organizations in the area? (possible scores: 0, 0.33, 0.67)					
10.3 Does the project have an exit plan that will ensure the sustainability of GAD efforts and benefits? (possible scores: 0, 0.33, 0.67)					
TOTAL GAD SCORE FOR THE PROJECT IDENTIFICATION AND DESIGN STAGES					

The Modern Babaylan

To be a modern Babaylan is to remember what was never lost.

It is not about rituals alone, but about **connection**, **healing**, **and courage**.

The Babaylan lives today in those who:

- speak truth in times of silence
- heal where there is pain
- teach with purpose and awareness
- stand for justice and community

The Modern Babaylan

You do not need the title to carry the spirit.
If you serve, you are a Babaylan.

If you fight for **justice**, you are a Babaylan.
If you **help others become whole**, you are a Babaylan.

The Babaylan was never gone.
It lives in those who choose to rise.

To be a Babaylan is to build a world where all genders live with dignity, equity, and power.

Let us all lead and live like the BABAYLANS!

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!